

THE CHAIN

Frank Able

Every commit is evidence.

The opening chapter

Bloody Pottery

Tangier, Morocco, Sunday, September 9, 2018
(Late Night)

Sten went rigid in the half-light. His breath was ragged. He stared at the pottery shard in the man's throat.

The room reeked of sweat and blood. The hotel was a cheap one, faded plaster and cracked tile, buried deep in the Tangier Kasbah. Even the sirens felt distant.

Dizziness overtook him, and Sten clenched his trembling hand into a fist. "Get yourself together," he whispered.

Wallpaper peeled in damp curls, the ceiling fan rattled overhead, and he tasted copper as blood dripped down his cheek. The assassin had grazed him. The man lay twisted on the floor. His clinical-white polo shirt bloomed with a dark, wet Rorschach test.

Sten pushed the window open, and humid air washed over him from the quiet street below. He was marked, hunted by an enemy whose reach extended far beyond Tangier.

It was never supposed to come to this.

He closed his eyes, and for a split second he was

back in Stockholm one year ago, sitting across from Kovalchuk in that chic rooftop bar while his fintech startup drowned in debt and his co-founders were already gone. Kovalchuk smiled, thin and knowing. He slid the tablet across the table.

"It's called The Chain," the man had said. He spoke as though he were sharing a dangerous secret. "You can build it, yes?"

The tablet held a design for a ledger no one could erase, every transaction permanent and provable. Move money through it once and you could never again deny you had. Kovalchuk did not say the word leverage. A man who owns the only honest record owns everyone who ever touched it.

Sten remembered the quiet hum of traffic below and the autumn breeze. The words had come easily, though every instinct screamed caution.

"Yes," he'd said. He knew already he'd regret it. "I can build it."

A fresh siren yanked him back to the present, louder now. Sten gritted his teeth and turned toward the dead assassin. They would send another hitman as soon as this one missed his check-in.

He thought of Rina. They had taken her from Malta three nights ago, and he had seen the room after, the overturned chair, no word from her

since. They wanted her mind, the proofs only she could write. It was what kept her alive, and what put her past his reach. For months he had kept a careful professional distance, terrified that admitting his feelings would make her as vulnerable as he was. Now the distance felt like a failure.

There was no easy way back now. At least not yet. Sten scanned the room because survival came first. The assassin lay twisted, mouth half-open, with the jagged pottery shard protruding from his throat. Sten's stomach churned, but he forced it down. Panic was a luxury.

The local police wouldn't buy a foreigner's story of self-defense. Especially not with the victim bleeding out on the floor of his own room.

He knelt beside the body, careful not to disturb the pooling blood, and patted down the pockets. There was no ID, but he found a burner phone with a screen cracked from their struggle. He thumbed it open to a single unread message.

"Target confirmed. Hotel Majestic. Finish tonight."

He glanced around the room. There was no exit besides the door or the fire escape through the window, and he had minutes at best. He wiped fingerprints from every surface he'd touched: the door

handle, the assassin's clothing, the cheap bedside table.

A brief flash hit him: the assassin's startled eyes as they tumbled, the ceramic shard rising in his hand and plunging forward.

Self-defense. But he had broken into the assassin's room. He had chosen confrontation over flight.

He checked the assassin's pockets again, methodical now, and found cash in euros and Moroccan dirhams, two extra ammunition clips, and a slip of paper folded into the wallet. Numbers were inked in block hand. Sten opened it, eyes narrowing at a string of numbers and letters: sixty-four characters in hexadecimal, a crypto private key scrawled by hand.

Farouk would have the means to use it. There was also an envelope with Sten's photo inside. He pocketed both without hesitation.

The sirens echoed close through Tangier's narrow streets as Sten stood at the threshold. The burner phone buzzed in his hand, and another message lit the cracked screen.

"Is it done?"

Adrenaline sharpened Sten's focus. They would want proof soon. Tangier's alleys wouldn't shield him long. A body cooling on the floor wasn't subtle evidence. Not in a city that traded in secrets.

He glanced at the corpse, dark hair and angular features, and did not recognize the man. The tattoos at the collar were Russian.

They would send someone else. He had to buy time. Confusion was his only ally.

The pistol lay on the floor, a Makarov too clean for Tangier's streets. He stared at it, knowing he should leave it because it would only bring more trouble. But Kovalchuk's hunters would not stop, and his hands moved before his mind could object. He scooped up the weapon, checked the full magazine, and slipped it into his bag, where the weight settled against the laptop used to build The Chain.

He retrieved a crudely engraved knife. He had acquired it a few days ago. It was etched with Triad markings. He dropped it near the assassin's corpse. He hoped it looked as if it had fallen during the fight.

He picked up the assassin's burner phone. His thumbs raced. He typed a response to the handlers.

"Encountered complications. Triad interference. Situation compromised."

He pressed send. The text zipped away. It might spread enough confusion to buy him time. This was the only kind of fight he had ever won. These things were decided in the system above the body,

in the beliefs the enemy ran on. Read what they believed, change one input they trusted, and let them recompute their way into a mistake. He had built a company on that move. Tonight he would stay alive on it. Sten's pulse pounded in his temples. He slipped the burner into his pocket. He took a breath. He stepped into the corridor. The phone vibrated again.

"Confirm. Is Ericson dead?"

Sten pocketed the phone and moved swiftly. He merged into the humid Tangier night.

Outside, the narrow street buzzed with mopeds and distant laughter. Vendors had shuttered their stalls hours ago, but the aroma of spices and roasting lamb still hung in the air. He walked briskly, head low and pulse racing, while every shadow hid eyes.

He rounded the first corner into an alley and kept close to the rough stone wall. The assassin's burner felt alien, its cracked screen still faintly glowing. Calling Farouk on it was risky, but he had no better option.

He keyed in the memorized number with his eyes on the alley's mouth, and the line clicked alive after two rings.

"Yes?" The voice was cautious and flat, with no recognition.

“It’s me,” Sten said.

A beat of silence. The tone shifted. “Sten. You’re early.”

“We need to meet now. Not in a few days.” Sten’s urgency was clipped. “The Russians found me.”

A brief pause. Farouk exhaled smoke. “That complicates things. Passports aren’t ready yet. Your new identities need more time. Quality takes patience.”

Panic rose, and Sten swallowed it. “I don’t have time. I don’t have patience. They’re already on me. There’s a dead Russian in my hotel.”

Farouk hesitated, calculating the risks. “Then it is worse than I thought. The price goes up. The documents must be expedited. Officials paid extra. You understand.”

“Fine,” Sten said tightly. “Whatever it takes. Just get me out of Tangier before someone kills me.”

Silence stretched. “Then there’s something else,” Farouk said finally. His voice was lower. “If I help you now, openly, this could turn bad for both of us. The Russians are not the only ones watching.”

A figure moved at the mouth of the alley, and Sten flattened himself into the shadows, holding his breath until a woman hurried past without noticing him and disappeared around another

corner.

“What do you want, Farouk?” Sten hissed. “Name the price.”

Farouk sighed. He was resigned. “A favor. Dangerous. We speak of this later. For now, make your way to the old Medina. Meet me near the spice market. And, Sten, dispose of that phone immediately.”

Sten nodded. “Understood.”

He crushed the phone under his heel, scattered the pieces into a nearby sewer grate, and walked toward the Medina as the twisting streets tightened around him.

Sten moved deeper into the maze of alleys, heart hammering against his ribs as the city pressed close. Arabic conversations floated through shuttered windows, laughter drifted from hidden courtyards, and shadows shifted behind curtained doorways until each movement set his nerves on edge.

He passed narrow passages. Carpets, leather bags, and rows of spices clung to the night air. The scent of cardamom brought a sharp flash of Malta. Ammar brewing coffee in the compound kitchen at midnight. He was muttering his favorite line from the project README. “Every commit has consequences.” Sten hadn’t taken it seriously

then. Men in shadowed doorways exchanged quiet words. Their eyes flickered toward him. He could not be sure, so he tested it. He turned into a dead-end of shuttered stalls, counted to five, and doubled back. If the same face came after him into a street with no exit, he would know. No one came. Paranoia, then. He kept moving and did not let himself trust the relief.

His fingers twitched and ached from the struggle. Just days ago he had been a coder, anonymous, invisible, safe. Now Ammar was dead, Sten had barely survived tonight, and he had ignored the obvious for months: the strange transactions, the men with guns, Kovalchuk's promises corrupting them all. Sten had let it happen.

He ducked under a low archway and nearly stumbled over a sleeping street beggar, who cursed softly in Arabic. Sten kept walking, hands jammed in pockets and eyes scanning each shadow.

How had he been so blind? He was arrogant to believe he could control this. To believe he could code his way around morality.

A sudden noise jolted him. He pressed against the stone wall, breath shallow. A cat darted from the shadows. The city felt alive with threats, watchers in every doorway.

A sudden wave of nausea hit him, and Sten stumbled into the shadows of a side alley to brace his

palm against the stone wall. He retched violently, knees shaking, the sour taste more than physical: guilt, raw and undeniable.

Images flooded him: the assassin's eyes widening in shock, the quiet gurgle as blood spilled onto white tiles. He spat into the gutter and breathed in ragged gasps, weak and ashamed.

Get a grip. You had no choice.

Sten wiped his mouth. Violence wasn't his language. He had intended to confront the man. To extract answers. But the assassin had pulled a gun. Instinct turned defensive reflex into something irreversible.

He steadied his breathing against the wall and moved on, determined not to break again.

The entrance to the Medina's spice market loomed ahead. He paused and scanned for Farouk, but the Moroccan was not visible, and Sten wondered if he was walking into a trap.

But there was no choice.

Sten stepped forward. He braced himself.

Farouk stood in the shadow of a shuttered spice stall, scanning the alleys. Beside him stood a younger man in his late twenties with the same quiet, institutional posture. His Real Madrid

jersey made a stark white contrast against the shadows.

“What happened at the hotel?” Farouk demanded.

Sten shook his head. “Their man found me; things escalated, and he’s dead.”

Farouk’s eyes narrowed. “How?”

“Accident,” Sten said curtly. “It wasn’t clean.”

Farouk exhaled slowly. He motioned to the man beside him. “This is Yusuf. My nephew. He is architecting your digital erasure. He built the Beckett identity you’ll be using.”

Yusuf nodded. His eyes were intelligent and kind. He handed Sten a small, scuffed phone. “Unregistered SIM. Factory reset an hour ago. The number lives in two places, this handset and mine. The tunnels I configured myself, so no one pulls it off the air. It is a sound perimeter, for now.”

Sten took the phone. He turned it over once in his palm. “Thanks, Yusuf.”

“Your passports aren’t ready,” Farouk interrupted. His voice dropped. “Moving quickly costs money.”

Sten slipped his hand into his bag. He withdrew a thick envelope. He passed it to Farouk. “It’s everything I have on me. Can you expedite?”

Farouk weighed it. He frowned. “It’s still not enough. Tangling with Russians carries a pre-

mium. We need more. The men you angered pay better.”

Their eyes met. Tension sparked. In Farouk’s gaze he saw calculation, a weighing of friendship against profit, and the caution of a man squeezed from above. Farouk had his own creditors, his own chains. Sten had seen this look before. Ammar had warned him about Kovalchuk’s loyalties, and then Ammar turned up dead.

“Get it done, Farouk,” Sten said. He spoke with steel and desperation. “You know I’m good for it.”

Farouk pocketed the envelope. His expression was unreadable. He gave a faint shrug. He slipped the bills into his jacket pocket. “Don’t think I’m ungrateful, Sten. But I expected more sincerity in currency.” He offered a faint smile. It was a hollow gesture. “Since the cash is short, consider me your creditor. I’ll come calling when I need a favor.”

Sten’s throat felt tight. “What kind of favor?”

Farouk patted him on the shoulder. It was comfort and warning. “I have connections that might require your technical touch. Some encryption or software trick. I won’t ask until I must. But when I do, I expect you to remember I took a risk to keep you breathing.” Calm. Almost gentle. “That’s how business works, yes?”

He stood there a moment longer. His hand lingered on Sten's shoulder. "This is as far as I can shield you without more payment. Remember: we've got an open tab. Debts don't vanish in Tangier."

Sten watched Farouk and Yusuf vanish into the shadows. His heart pounded. He realized he might have bought himself another enemy.

Riad Dar Saba was hidden behind an unassuming archway. A brass plate was the size of a playing card. Sten slipped through the courtyard. He handed Farouk's fake reservation number to a woman named Saba. He followed her to a small room. It smelled of lemon verbena and dried mint. She glanced at the blood on his sleeve. She asked no questions. Tangier manners.

He locked the door. He sank onto the bed fully clothed. He stared at the ceiling. The assassin's last breath still echoed. Farouk's debt pressed from all sides. Malta flickered through his mind. Rina's room door hanging open. Zip ties scattered across the marble floor.

The burner phone buzzed with a number that was not Farouk's and not in the contacts. The SIM was hours old, the phone factory-reset, and nobody should have had the number yet.

Three words. No signature.

We saw everything.

The riad was a fortress of stone and tile. But it could not keep out the scents of the Medina. The greasy smell of charred lamb. The sharp tang of diesel from a generator. A distant call to prayer broadcast from a failing speaker. The voice crackled with static. It was swallowed by the hum of the air conditioning.

Sten sat up. His hands were shaking. The number had lived in two places, this handset and Yusuf's. The tunnels were clean; he had watched Yusuf build them. So either Farouk's circle had a hole in it, or someone had stood close enough to watch the handoff. The phone offered no sender. No context. No way to reply. Neither answer let him breathe. The sentence turned the riad's thick walls into paper.

He pressed two fingers to his left wrist. He counted the beats. Rapid. Irregular. He closed his eyes. He forced his breath into a four-second cycle. Focus on the rhythm.

He'd told his co-founder Oskar the same thing in the final days of their startup SynapseCore. He thought code could solve any problem. Even the ones created by their other co-founder Erik's greed. Sten had promised he could fix everything and make the company profitable. He'd been

wrong. Oskar had believed him. Now Oskar was a ghost.

Farouk would understand. They had been trading in ghosts since they met in Virginia in 2010. Sten had been living a double life. He was a technical leader at Bluecall by day. He helped the startup reach unicorn status. He was an anti-government agitator in Stockholm by night. He believed distributed systems were the only way to break the state's monopoly on truth.

He spent his nights coding decentralized leak-platforms. He spent his days maintaining the facade of a systems engineer. A programmer and a terrorist, Farouk had called him once. Same thing, really.

Sten had patched the DGED's tracking system in 2015. Farouk had returned the favor. He provided the emergency liquidity that kept Sten's apartment in 2017. In exchange, Sten had traced the financial backbone of a smuggling ring.

They had built up mutual trust over the years, but could Farouk make the DGED ignore a dead man?

He stared into the darkness. There was no real rest for him anymore. He was chained even harder to his own creation.

He closed his eyes. All he saw was bloody pottery.

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